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ABSTRACT

This paper presents information on a new educational phenomenon in China--private schools. It reflects on the history of private education in China and its disappearance since 1949. Economic, social, and political conditions that prompted the reemergence of private schools since China's economic reform started in 1978 are examined. The article provides a preliminary overview of the rapid development of private schools by examining three major types of private schools, analyzing their characteristics, and pinpointing their potentials and problems. The three major types of private schools include: (1) urban elite primary and secondary; (2) ordinary private schools; and (3) private regular (degree-granting) universities and adult universities. The reappearance and rapid development of private schools in China raises questions concerning educational inequality, efficiency, and diversity. Private schools give parents more choices, may stimulate public schools to improve educational quality, and more closely link schools with society. They feature self-governance, self-support, self-defined curriculum, self-selected students and faculty, and small size. Their exemption from state mandate and self-defined mission give them greater latitude for development. However, their autonomy is influenced by the marketplace, social and legal support, and government regulations. Although the Chinese government has generally responded positively to private schools, it has not developed concrete policies or provided support for improvement. (Author/LMI)

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The Development and Prospect of Private Schools in China: A Preliminary Study

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This article studies a new educational phenomenon in China: private schools. It reflects on the history of private education in China and its disappearance since 1949. Economic, social and political conditions that prompted the re-emergence of private schools since China's economic reform started in 1978 are examined. The article provides a preliminary overview of the rapid development of private schools by looking at three major types of private schools, analyzing their characteristics and pinpointing their potentials and problems. Finally the paper discusses the prospects and issues to be looked into if private schools in China are to survive and develop continuously.

Introduction

Education in China has been under the government's control since 1949, when the Chinese communist party took power. For more than three decades, all schools in China were run by the government, and it was not until 1982 when modern China's first private school was set up. However, into the 1990s, private

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schools have been undergoing rapid development. In August 1992, a private school, Guang Ya Primary School, was established in Chendu city of Sichuan Province. Deemed the "first elite school in China," it caused sensational responses nationally and internationally for its charging of high fees, promise of high quality, and use of high technology. Meanwhile, private schools are cropping up throughout the country. In Beijing, the first private primary school, Jing Hua Primary School, was set up in September 1992. Since then, 10 more were set up and another 90 schools were awaiting permission. In Zejiang province where economy is quite developed, more than 40 private schools were open in 1993, doubling in one year the total number of private schools in the province. In the under-developed Guangxi, it is reported that four hundred private schools have been set up. Foreign forces are also joining the trend. In 1993, a Hong Kong-China joint-venture boarding school called "International Experimental School" was set up in Nanjing. Follow suit are private schools throughout the country given name such as "international school," "elite school" which are involved with foreign companies. The total number of private schools in the country is reported to have reached 1,200 in 1994 (Xi Lin, 1994).

What brought private schools from total disappearance to the rapid growth? This paper provides an overview of the development of private schools in today's China. It reflects on the history of private education in China and its disappearance since 1949, and examines the economic, social and political conditions that prompted the re-emergence of private schools. The paper looks at

the three major types of private schools, analyzing their characteristics and pinpointing their potentials and problems. The paper deals with these questions: What purpose do they serve? Do they serve only the rich, or everyone, or only the rural students? Who set up the schools? What vision do they have for the schools? How much tuition is charged? What are the admission standards? What are the teaching and learning conditions? Finally, the paper discusses the prospects of development and issues to be looked into if private schools in China are to survive and develop continuously.

Origins and History of Private Schools in China

China has a long history of private education. The first private school was set up about 2,500 years ago by Confucius (551-479 BC), who in his life time toured the country and taught over 3,000 students. Confucius developed rich educational thoughts which still direct the teaching and learning in China. Other famous philosophers during this period, such as Mencius and Sun Zi, all had their own private schools, spreading their thoughts and passing them on through private teaching.

During the Warring Period (475-221 BC), private education had become a very important form of education. Scholars formed into different schools of thoughts, criticizing and influencing each other. The Han Dynasty (206 BC-220) saw private education entering a prosperous stage, with individuals teaching classical cannons and some scholars having thousands of students. During the Shui (581-618) and Tang (618-907) dynasties, public education (*guan*

xue) as well as private education went into a new stages of development. The government operated universities and vocational schools while the public sectors set up numerous schools. Buddhism was then being actively integrated into the Chinese way of life, which saw the setting up of thousands of temples in the country. Each temple in fact became a private teaching place for literacy and for philosophy of life. Meanwhile, the Chinese traditional civil service examination was established to select government officials. Those who passed the examination were given titles, wealth and fame. This furthered the development of private schools, as passing the examination required many years of study and competition was very strong.

During the Wudai Shiguo (907-979) and Song dynasty (960-1279), academy (*shuyuan*) became the most significant form of private education. Scholars gathered in the academies, reviewing lessons for the civil service exam, listening to important philosophers, discussing intellectual as well as political issues, and sharing learning experiences and information. Self-study and discussion were the primary form of learning. According to Borthwick (1983, pp. 6-7), these schools had not only an established teaching program, but also a good administration system.

While higher learning in Chinese history had involved the government, primary education had always taken a private form. Sishu, a one-teacher private school, had for centuries been the primary form of teaching literacy. Students were either taught individually or in groups, and teachers were hired by individual

families or a village, or the teacher operated the school by himself. They relied on fees and tuition for survival, or sometimes they simply ate or lived in the student's home. Classical cannons were used as the textbooks, and moral education and learning of scientific and daily life knowledge were integrated into teaching. Rote learning was the main learning method, and the primary goal for students were to be able to read and write. This form of education continued in China's vast rural areas until 1949, when the People's Republic of China was established.

In contemporary China after the Opium War in the 1840s, education was stressed to be the way for China to develop economically, culturally and militarily. "New learning" was called for as opposed to traditional teaching of classical canons for the sake of examination. Private schools and universities were set up to teach Western thoughts, science and technology so that China could counter the invasion of Western countries and Japan. In 1905, Fu Dan University and China University were established. A famous entrepreneur, Chen Jiangeng, took money out of his own pocket and established the Xia Men University in Fujian province in 1919. That same year, Zhang Boling set up the Nan Kai University in Tienjin. Both Xia Men University and Nan Kai University became famous universities turning out thousands of students who became important figures in China's contemporary history. For example, the late Premier Zhou Enlai was a graduate of the Nan Kai University. Overall in 1931, there were 47 private universities in China, while state-funded universities totaled 56.

In 1947, of the 207 universities in the country, 79 were private higher educational institutions.

Private primary and secondary schools also occupied an important place in contemporary China. In 1906, one year after the civil service examination was abolished, the country had 59 private secondary and primary schools, with a teaching staff of 606 and a student body of 3855, carrying out 79% of the teaching as compared to government schools. In 1928, in the city of Beijing, the total number of secondary and primary schools reached 317, with the ratio of government schools and private schools being 1 : 5. By 1947, statistics collected in just five cities (Beijing, Tienjin, Nanjing, Shanghai and Wuhan) revealed the significant numbers of private schools in China: the five cities, had a total of 1,452 private primary schools, comprising 56% of all primary schools, teaching 307,400 students; a total of 439 secondary schools, comprising 84% of all secondary schools, teaching 136,200 students (Mei Ruli, 1994, pp. 20-22).

While private schools played an important role in China's contemporary educational system, they disappeared after the Chinese Communist Party came to power in 1949. Building China into a communist system, the government in the early 1950s had succeeded in eliminating private elements in the society and establishing a state ownership system. Private businesses were turned into public properties, and all schools were gradually turned into public-owned, state-funded schools. They used the uniform curriculum compiled by the ministry of education, followed an educational goal which is to train socialist new persons for

the communist cause. School development were under the tight control of the central planning system. In rural areas, schools were called "people-run" schools, but besides having to rely on themselves for a large proportion of educational funding, they did not have any autonomy in curriculum and decision-making. Thus by 1976 when the Cultural Revolution (1966-1976) ended, there were literally no private schools in China.

Economic Reform and Social Changes

However, tremendous changes have taken place in China's educational system since 1978 (Lin, 1993; Hayhoe, 1992; Epstein, 1991). That year, an economic reform was launched which aimed at modernizing the country of 1.2 billion people. Many new policies have since been adopted, for example, sweeping egalitarianism under the socialist scheme is abolished, competition and efficiencies are stressed, private ownership becomes legitimate, and local initiatives are encouraged. There is greater autonomy and more choices available in the society.

After more than a decade and a half, millions of private enterprises have sprung up in the country, and a new middle class has appeared: these are people who have made millions by doing business. Although successful in their business, they often lack the time to take care of their children and oversee their intellectual growth. They thus demand for quality schools with a full range of services. Meanwhile the economic reform gives people greater autonomy to do what they want, and private ownership such

as running one's own school has become possible. As the demand is great and the number of people who can afford high tuition and fees is increasing, running a private school has become a profitable business. Elite private schools have thus come into existence to meet the demands.

Further, the government's centralized control over education has brought about many problems to the public school system. First, there is a great shortage of funding by the state in setting up enough schools for the huge population. The present school system, having to serve nearly 200 million students, has had great difficulties in meeting all the needs for kindergartens, secondary schools and higher education (primary education is compulsory). In recent years, the average annual education investment is 50 billion, averaging ¥40 per person, or US $8.00 (Li Yixian, 1993, p. 6). Because of lack of funding, more than 50% of the rural students cannot go on to secondary schools and thus have no chance of entering higher education. Lack of funding also render schools to be poorly equipped, teachers under-qualified and underpaid, and school administrators short of fund to organize educational activities. That the government can not meet all the needs of educational development poses an urgent need for the participation of all sectors of the society to set up schools and provide educational opportunities.

Thus private schools have become an alternative to public education. In a meeting held in Tienjin Educational Institute in September 23-25, 1992, 50 scholars from all over the country gathered to discuss about the development of private education.

The consensus was that there is no denial that in the 1990s there exists in China a dual school system: public and private education, and that the rapid development of private schools can not be ignored. As William R. Doerner reported:

> An estimated 1,5 million students are now enrolled in officially sanctioned private institutions, including 17 universities, 54 secondary and 655 primary schools; hundred of others have sprung up across the country without formal recognition by the authorities (1993, p. 43).

In short, responding to the needs of the society, all types of private schools have been set up and are growing quickly. They include private primary schools, junior and senior high schools, vocational schools, all-girl schools, adult education universities and universities offering certificates and degree programs. The re-appearance of private education has broken the monopoly of the government over the school system, and has injected diversity and dynamics into the educational system.

Characteristics of Private Schools

Private education is defined in this paper as including all educational institutions which are privately founded and where considerable decision-making power rest in private hands, even though the state may be involved through the provision of resources and the exercise of some control.

Different types of private schools have demonstrated a variety of characteristics. In the following, we are going to

focus on three types: urban elite primary and secondary schools, ordinary private secondary schools in urban and rural areas, and private regular universities offering degree programs and adult education universities. We will look at their purpose of schooling, clientele, curriculum, teaching and learning conditions, and position in the society.

1. Urban elite primary and secondary schools

These are schools that receive the most publicity nationally and internationally. Responding to the fact that there are now in China over a million people who are millionaires, who demand for and who can afford better education for their children, and the fact that hundred of thousands of foreigners and overseas Chinese are doing business in the country, these schools cater to the rich and powerful, not to the ordinary citizens. They boast high educational standards, strict discipline, and excellent learning conditions and environment. Many of these schools are boarding schools with low teacher student ratio. They charge fees which seem to be stunningly high to ordinary people, yet affordable only by a few.

One typical example is the so called "China's first elite school," the Guang Ya Primary School in Chengdu City of Sichuan province. The school was open in 1992 with much fanfare. It claims that its teaching draws from the advanced teaching theories and methods from Hong Kong, Taiwan and Western countries. The teachers and administrators hired are well-known foreign and Chinese scholars who would teach and supervise the schooling process.

English is the daily teaching and living language so that when the students graduate from primary school, their command of English would be at university graduate level. The classrooms are equipped with pianos, TV sets, video cameras, computers and so on. After graduation, the students would have opportunities to go abroad for exchange studies, to be admitted into provincial key-point schools or directly by American secondary schools. The school charges a one-time fee of ¥22,000, and annual tuition was ¥4200 for the first year, which would double to ¥8400 for students coming in after the first year. As a boarding school, students have to follow strict schedule in daily life and their study, and the development of independent abilities is stressed (Hou Jianwen, 1993, pp. 7-8).

In Beijing, a private boarding school named "Great Wall" was open in the summer of 1993, with an enrollment capacity of 150 students. It offers services and charges fees similar to that of Guang Ya (Doerner, 1993, p. 43). In another private boarding school, Jing Hua Primary School, students are to take extra English and computer courses and have more than a dozen selective in musical instrument, dancing, ritual and so on. The school charges a one time fee of ¥30,000 and annual tuition is ¥14,000. (Li Yixian, 1993, p. 7). Both schools had full subscription in a short period of time.

In Guang Zhou, the Ying Hao Secondary School requires parents to put up a one-time ¥150,000 into the school's education savings fund, and the annual tuition charged for each student is not to be less than 12% of the ¥150,000 (this amount will be returned to

parents at graduation). Another newly found school in an adjacent city is said to charge an even higher amount. In Shanghai, the Xin Shi Ji Primary and Secondary School promised that students would master a foreign language in primary school, and that a second foreign language would be offered at senior high school level. Students would learn basic skills in computer hardware and software from primary level (Xi Lin, 1994, p. 9). In the remote province Gui Zhou, a private school called "Private Advanced School" promised in their recruitment advertisement that special attention would be given to students with talents in areas such as music, arts, literature, painting, foreign languages and so on. The school even promises to run a semi-military campus, with teachers and students eating together, living together, and playing together.

The appearance of elite private schools have raised concerns about social equality. Featuring exclusivity and elitism, they serve only the well-to-do or the economically advantaged. Because children's access to private schools are closely connected to parents' political and economic power, these private schools might be used to reproduce social hierarchies, as has been discussed in other countries (Kane, 1992; Griggs, 1985; Cookson et al., 1985; Baird, 1977).

These concerns are not unfounded. While ordinary Chinese citizens make on average ¥2,000-¥3,000 a year, parents who can afford the high fees have to be very rich in the Chinese sense. According to a report, of the 162 students enrolled in the Guang Ya Primary School the first year, 60% of the parents are

millionaires who are private individual entrepreneurs. Successful in their business but generally low in their educational level, they wish that their children receive good education, or become educated persons who someday would continue their business success (Zhang Zhen, 1993, p. 48). In another private school in Yun Nan province, 60% of the parents are business owners and private entrepreneurs, the rest are socialites in law, medical and entertaining professions. In a private school in Beijing, 39. 2% of the parents are business owners or corporate CEO, 17.9% are foreigners working in Beijing, 14.7% are Chinese who returned from overseas, and the rest are private individual entrepreneurs, socialites and Chinese in charge of a foreign business (Xi Lin, 1994).

In all, these elite schools arise out of social demand and provide diversity in China's schooling system. Concerns over their elite approaches have failed to stop their increasing number. In early 1994, the number of elite private schools was reported to have reached 40 and more are being set up (Xi Lin, 1994).

2. Ordinary Private Schools

It would be wrong to assume that all the private schools in China charge high fees and cater only to the rich and the powerful. In fact, most of the private schools are for ordinary people, charging moderate fees and operating under vastly different conditions. They have appeared in large numbers in the 1990s. In Tien Jin city, since the fall of 1993, 17 private schools of different level have been set up (Zhang Fengmin, 1994,

p. 10-11). In Guangxi, the number of private schools was said to have reached 400, with more than 70,000 students and teachers (Xi Lin, 1994). In Yongning county of Guangxi, more than ten private schools have been set up by the local peasants serving children in the rural areas. In Wen Zhou city of Zhe Jiang province, there are more than 10 private schools serving urban residents.

In the summer of 1993, this author went to visit the Luchuan county of Guangxi province. There she learned from the county bureau of education that there were four private secondary schools in the county. The schools accepted rural students who failed the very competitive admission exams to senior high schools or universities, but who still wish to go to university and have an opportunity to change their life fundamentally (chance of social mobility is extremely limited for rural students). They are taught by teachers who are either retired or fired because they violate the state's family planning policy by having more than one child. The schools are small in size and rely on student fees to survive. One school was started by a "People's Representative" to the Provincial People's Congress. It was said that he was so deeply concerned about the lack of educational opportunities in the rural areas that he set up the school to give the students a second chance.

So far, there is no accurate number of this type of schools existing in the country. Xi Lin (1994) estimates that there is a total of 1,200 private schools in China, but this seems an underestimation given that there are over 2,000 counties in the whole country, while only in Yongning county in the economically

underdeveloped Guangxi province, ten private schools have been opened. Rural education in China has always been given little attention, therefore reports about rural private schools are scarce. It is thus a challenge for researchers to learn more about and have a more complete picture over the scale and scope of the development of private schools in the rural areas.

The ordinary private schools do not have the luxury and excellent learning and living conditions as claimed by the elite schools, but compared with public schools they do have more autonomy in hiring, admission, curriculum arrangement, teaching methods and school administration. For example, in Tienjin, six of the thirteen private schools, besides finishing the curriculum requirement by the government, added courses in foreign languages, minority language, music, painting, dancing and so on. They also have the liberty to hire the teachers they want, who usually are rich in teaching experience with high educational attainment. However, most of them have disadvantages: they are short in funding, teachers are generally over-aged, and there is a lack of standard in school administration. Small size also hampers their efficiency and effectiveness (Zhang Fengmin, 1994, p. 10).

3. Private Regular (Degree Granting) Universities and Adult Universities

The first private university established after the economic reform started was the Zhong Hua Social University which was set up in 1982. By 1994, Beijing already has 30 private universities. In the economically advanced Guangdong province, 15 universities

were awaiting permission to be opened in 1994. In the Spring of 1993, this author met the president of a private university from Sheng Yang city in Northern China. He had just set up a university called "Xin Ke," meaning to promote science. He and his friend who co-founded the university were both prestigious educators in the province. He had been the vice minister of the provincial bureau of education and for more than 10 years the president of a teacher training university. Retired at age 60, he saw the great demand in the society for higher education and the limited capacities of the present higher education system. After two years' planning the university was opened in September 1993, enrolling 700 students who took the regular National College and University Entrance Exam and obtained above-average scores. The students specialize in English, international trade, accounting, and so on, areas in great demand by the burgeoning economy. They are to study 3 years and would receive an undergraduate degree. The university charge ¥1,300 for each semester, classrooms are rented from nearby organizations, and teachers are hired from universities around, who want to supplement their income by taking up a second job. While handling the school affairs, the president has also set up a real estate company with the intent of raising money for the school, taking benefits from the rising price of land and buildings. To what extent is the university successful is not known yet.

Private universities have been met with difficulties of various degrees. For example, the China Scientific Management and Administration University in Beijing did not own a single car, and

university officials ride their bikes to work, going back and forth to 21 teaching places where students are studying. The staff student ration is as high as 1:28, while a government funded university is 1:4. The office for university administration was in a room of 25 square meters, which is used as bedroom for the president as well as storage room for the university. Another university, Jing Hua Medical University, has an annual per student budget of ¥275.5, much lower than the ¥2,000 in state-operated universities. The university lost ¥40,510 in one year, and could not recover from the loss until later on some donations covered the deficit (Qin Guozho, 1991, pp. 33-42).

The phenomena of private higher education has caught the attention of educators. In 1991 a book was edited which reflects on the history of private higher education in China, reviews the experience of foreign countries and discusses possibilities of developing private universities in the country (Wei Yitong and Li Zeyu, 1991). In June of 1994, a conference was held to discuss the relationship between the market economy and private universities, laws that need to be in place, and organization and administration of private universities. The hot topic of research today is how China can quickly develop its higher education system so that it can provide more opportunities for the masses, and private university is seen as an avenue to do this.

Another type of universities are adult education universities that offer diplomas and certificates. They are set up for people who want to change jobs, to learn new skills and knowledge so that they fit into the needs of the economy. A well-known one is

Shanghai Chian Zhing Spare-Time Training Institute. Cai Guangtien, the founder, started the institute with ¥100 in 1983 with 300 students studying 4 subject areas. By 1987, he had trained a total of 16,000 students. He owed his success to valuing the use of information, careful planning, quick decision-making, strict rules, proper reward and punishment mechanism, and efficiency and effectiveness in business handling.

Prospects and Problems of Private Education in China

Although private schools are becoming a major educational phenomenon in China in the 1990s, few systematic studies have been done, and the numbers of various types of private schools given by various sources are often contradictory. Despite these, a preliminary review us to some prospects of private educational development in the country.

One prospect is that private education provide alternatives and diversities to China's school system. It may open a route to education investment not only from the government but also from the whole society. Ordinary private schools provide opportunities for rural students who would not otherwise get from the public school system. Private schools also help meet the demands of economic development by offering subjects badly needed in the economy.

The second prospect is that elite private schools establish a new hierarchy in China's educational system. The fact that elite private schools charge very high fees and offer a superior

learning environment may have a direct implication on the equality of education, namely on students' access to quality education, on their academic achievement and social mobility.

Elite private schools raise questions about educational equality in China, as many people have done so. Some people are worried that elite private schools enlarge the gap between the poor and the rich, and perpetuate the advantages of the rich and powerful. Others are positive. The opinion is that since these private schools do not cost a penny from the government, they do meet the needs of some people and will be of more benefit than harm to the society. Regardless, with a free market quickly building in China, it seems inevitable that all kinds, and all types of schools will appear and co-exist, as long as there are social demands.

Private schools may also present a challenge to the public school system, in that they have different organizational goals and culture, have greater autonomy in curriculum arrangement, greater decision-making power and a closer linkage between school and society. Under the influence of private schools, some public schools are reported to be trying to transform into semi-private schools by collecting funds for themselves, broadening their services, and charging fees to students (Li Yixian, 1993, p. 7).

Private schools, particularly private universities, might have a positive impact on the country's economic development -- they are trying very hard to respond to the needs in the economic system; they enlarge access to secondary and post-secondary education, they open the door to more young people who yearn for

higher education; financially they help fill in the great shortage of funding from the state.

Private schools may also promote other significant changes in the educational system. It is reported that private schools, due to their greater autonomy, put less emphasis on political orthodoxy and are more efficient. Some private school teachers admit quietly that they steer clear of socialist dogma and political indoctrination which have dominated their teaching for decades (Doerner, 1993, p. 43; Lin, 1993, 1991). In all, private schools may open a way for China's educational reform toward decentralization, efficiency, diversity, and a closer connection with social and economic development.

Despite these prospects, private schools are facing serious problems. Many ordinary private schools are small in size, short in funding and continuous source of support. Due to their needs to attract students whose tuition the school must rely on for survival, some schools have to lower their admission standards. Quality of teaching in many schools is also a problem. According to a survey of the teaching force in 10 private schools in Wen Zhou city, 90% of the 140 teachers hired were retired teachers. They may be experienced, good teachers but their old age and lack of energy limit their ability to educate the young (Educational Research, 1993, pp. 78-79, 52). Private schools also have difficulty in hiring young teachers and retaining capable ones due to a lack of standard for promotion and recognition of their work. Another common problem is that they have great difficulty in providing housing and adequate health benefit for the teachers,

which most of the public schools do. In an interview with 11 private school principals (Zhang Wei and Ji Ping, 1994, pp. 8-10), private schools also face a variety of administrative problems. For example, they do not have free access to the land their schools are built on, as public schools do, and they can not afford to buy the land to build their own buildings, as it is very expensive. They are taxed on many fronts and as much as businesses. Legislatively, the ownership of the school, the relationship between parents and the schools, and their position in China's entire educational system has not been clarified by the government. Further, there is great uncertainty as to whether the society will accept the diplomas from private schools, and the employment prospect of heir students are very worrisome.

In conclusion, the implication of the return of private education in China is profound, and so is the seriousness of problems. That the private schools feature self-governance, self-support, self-defined curriculum, self-selected students and faculty and small size, and that they have the freedom not to follow state mandate and they can have their own mission give them greater latitude for development. However their freedom and autonomy are conditioned by the marketplace, by social and legal support and by government regulations.

The reappearance and rapid development of private schools in China opens a new development stage in the country, raising questions regarding equality of educational opportunities, efficiency and diversity in the education system. Private schools

provide an alternative to public education, give parents more choices, and may be a stimulation to public schools, and in effect linking schools with society more closely. China as a developing country necessarily need the supplement of private education to solve the great demand for education, particularly at the secondary level.

In the quick rising of private schools, the Chinese government has been generally positive in response. Although it still withholds permission for some special groups such as religious institutions to run their schools, it is quickening its steps to review applications for the opening of schools. However, the government has yet to make concrete policies and give support for private schools to survive and improve. The environment for the development of private schools is still tough: standards need to be set up, laws and regulations need to be made, and administrative system of private schools need to be in place. These are challenges for the society, the government, and educators if private schools are to survive and continue to grow in China.

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